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Beyond the Black and White: Using Memoirs for Insight into Detroit's Leftist Movement,1930s-1950s

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ABSTRACT

The 1930s-1950s saw a significant growth and change in Detroit's leftist labour movement. Memoirs provide invaluable insight into social movements as they provide personal accounts and insight that institutional and document source materials lack. While they must be approached with caution, they balance objectivity with personal narratives that add the human element to historical studies, ultimately creating a more balanced interpretation. The unpublished memoirs of Maurice Sugar, and Avrahm Mezerick offer insight into Detroit's leftist movement through their reflections on their childhood experiences. Sugar and Mezerick discuss their childhoods through very different lenses to highlight their inspirations and motivations for working within the leftist and labour movements. Due to the leftist movement's ties to industrial unionism, and the collective identity that unionism encourages, memoirs offer a wealth of information on the often-overlooked individuality within the labour movement. These two case studies serve as exemplars for the potential memoirs hold.

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INTRODUCTION

Memoirs are written in retrospect, often unprompted, and without formal guidance prior to publication. The historian has no control over the content that may or may not appear. The author can be as unfiltered and unscripted as he or she wishes. However, they may also choose to analyze their life experiences in order to make a point about the world they lived in. Without control over the creation of the source material, the historian must walk the delicate line of discerning and interpreting an individual's experiences without slandering their memory by denying their lived experiences.

Memoirs provide valuable insight into historical events and time periods by allowing modern-day readers to understanding how both historical figures and ordinary people viewed the world in which they lived. While they are an inevitably biased source, and one which may not be entirely reliable due to their personal nature, the insight they provide is invaluable. Therefore, while caution is critically important, historians may use memoirs to gain a more comprehensive understanding of any given historical event or time period. This paper examines how two particular memoirs demonstrate that memoirs serve as valuable historical sources, despite historians' tendencies to discount them.

While many memoirs focus on adult experiences, looking at memories of childhood can also offer valuable insights into critical periods of historical change. These perceptions can also provide perspectives on the later lives and values of the people recording them. The following is an examination of the memoirs of two men, Maurice Sugar and Avrahm G. Mezerick who were both active in the leftist movement in Detroit from the 1930s through the 1950s. Both were Jewish men, minimally involved in their faith community, who grew up in early twentieth-

century Detroit, but did not document their memories until their seventies. Neither of the men were born in Detroit; they moved to the city as children, as their families sought a better life.

Both men grew up in a time of significant change. Detroit was growing at exponential rates. The automotive industry was taking off and bringing with it a wave of industrialization to the Motor City. The leftist movement was developing alongside industrial unionism – a movement that both Sugar and Mezerick would engage with in different ways.

Sugar was a prolific labour lawyer who contributed significantly to the creation of the United Auto Workers (UAW). He was known for his creative solutions to legal challenges and the labour movement inspired his folk songs, which were frequently published in local media. He practiced from the 1920s-1950 and served as the UAW general counsel from 1937-1946.

Meanwhile, Mezerick was a journalist, actively involved in Detroit labour and civil rights movements throughout the 1930s. As the steering committee chair for the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights (CPCR), Mezerick helped coordinate numerous sit-down strikes and contributed to publications that condemned the actions of Henry Ford, the Ford Motor Company, and the Black Legion, a group that used to terrorize Black people in the 1930s.[1] Given that their work overlapped, and that we know that Sugar worked with the CPCR, it is highly likely that the two men knew one another and worked together through the organization.[2]

In order to thoroughly analyze the Sugar and Mezerick's memoirs, we must first establish a background for their lives. This includes early twentieth-century Detroit, Detroit's Jewish community, and the leftist labour and civil rights movements that the men would go on to serve

[1] Walter P. Reuther Library, "Hidden Gem: A.G. and Marie Mezerick Papers" Last modified September 15 2015. http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/12999

[2] American Civil Liberties Union and Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, "Black Legion – Citizens Committee", roster, 1936, Scrapbook photocopies, A.G. Mezerick and Marie Hempel Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

throughout their careers. Once the historical context has been established, the literature on memoir and autobiographies as genres will be analyzed further to establish the basis required to explore Sugar and Mezerick's memoirs as both historical sources and as pieces of unpublished literature.

Finally, once this background is established we will analyze the individual memoirs in comparison to their historical context and to each other. Given that the two men worked together within the labour and civil rights movements, the manner in which they represent their childhood experiences offers insight into the paths that led them to their careers. Both men observed the pervasive social and economic inequality during their childhood, experienced challenges due to financial instability, and experienced anti-semitism, despite being removed from much Jewish culture. They were homegrown Detroit activists and their childhood. experiences, and their perspectives on those experiences, offer insights into their careers and leftist activism. Their memoirs illustrate how the men's childhood on the edge of prosperity shaped their perceptions of the world.

Background: Immigration, Anti-Semitism, Urban Divides, and Activism

The many changes that occurred in Detroit during the first three decades of the twentieth century are well documented. There is a seemingly endless stream of books on minority living conditions, labour rights, and migration. The early twentieth century saw large domestic and international human migratory patterns, largely due to the increasing industrialization of northern and mid-western cities. The increased job availability paired with discriminatory practices elsewhere drew racial minorities to the growing city centres. This concept of "push and pull"

factors reappears throughout most discussion of both domestic and international human migration.[3]

Detroit was one of many cities undergoing rapid growth. It would come to stand out and be recognized as the automotive capital by the 1920s due to the rise of the Ford Motor Company, General Motors, and the Dodge brothers amongst the many other smaller suppliers and manufacturers found within the greater Detroit area. In just a few decades it had transformed from being a small but important commercial centre for Great Lakes trade into a manufacturing leader. By the 1920s it was the fourth largest city in the country, the third largest production centre, propelled almost entirely by the automotive industry.[4] In only a few short decades, the city grew exponentially, and new industry and labour requirements came into play alongside growing immigrant communities and racial conflict.

Initially, much of the city's settlement was along the Detroit River waterfront. By 1900 the city was beginning to expand, absorbing the surrounding townships into a developing suburban population.[5] By the 1920s, the city began dividing itself along ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic lines.[6] As international immigrant and domestic migrant communities' populations increased, so did the social class divide and the rate of racialized hate speech and pro-Christian rhetoric. Anti-Semitism was alive and well in the United States. While the city's population boomed, the deeply-seated prejudices within American society grew as well. The need for workers outweighed the desire to maintain a white "American" society.

[3] Patrick Sharkey, "Geography Migration of Black and White Families Over Four Generations" *Demography* 52, no. 1 (2015): 209.
[4] Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3.
[5] Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, 94.
[6] Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality*, 327.

One of the reasons for the ethnic enclave settlements was migrant communities' desire to stay together. They sought to maintain customs, religious traditions, and their native languages in small communities within the broader Detroit region. There are also migratory patterns that suggest that once a given migrant follows a path from point of origin to destination, the rate of migrants to follow that same path will increase. Along with the development of consistent patterns of migration, immigrants typically settle near other members of their community for support. These develop into clusters of settlement in the final destination.[7]

Through the early decades of the twentieth century, Detroit continued to be settled following class and racial lines. The inner city became increasingly poor as black migrant workers moved in and the established white demographic fled to the suburbs.[8] The areas surrounding the various factories were increasingly middle class, particularly near the Ford Motor Company once they implemented their 5-dollar, 8-hour, work day. Olivier Zunz has firmly established that Detroit became "a metropolis reorganized by ethnicity and class."[9] How this would affect the generation being raised in the city has been skirted around for decades. With so much emphasis being placed upon racial tensions, economic development, and the rapidly developing labour movement, children's experiences were overlooked.

Nativist sentiments have been prominent throughout American history, and had an impact on Detroit. Most well-documented from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, anti-immigrant rhetoric has been developed towards Asian immigrants, Eastern and Southern European immigrants, and Mexican immigrants, among others.[10] The spread of nativist rhetoric

[7] Sharkey, "Geographic Migration of Black and White Families Over Four Generations," 212.
[8] While Detroit's "white flight" is often believed to have begun post-WW2, the first official policy for slum clearance was part of the Housing Act of 1934. This would be advanced to official racially segregated housing programs throughout the city of Detroit. (Kinney, "The Mechanics of Race", 2011, p. 41)
[9] Zunz, *The Changing Face of* Inequality, 399.
[10] Julia Young, "Making American 1920 Again? Nativism and US Immigration, Past and Present," *Journal of Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (2017): 220.

would prove problematic for immigrants to the United States and is arguably one of the enduring trends in American politics. Despite touting a history as a "nation of immigrants", the American tradition seems to be one in which groups of immigrants, once established, try to prevent future groups of immigrants from seizing the same opportunities.[11] These ongoing nativist sentiments would affect the lives of the American Jewish population, that was viewed as a separate racial group.

Given that both Sugar and Mezerick were of Jewish descent, a basic understanding of Detroit's Jewish community is required in order to contextualize their experiences. Historians studying Jewish history paint a picture of a strong, active Jewish community in Detroit. Their population began to grow in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century the influx of Eastern European Jewish immigrants grew the city's Jewish population to approximately 10,000 in 1900 and 34,000 in 1914.[12] During the same short period of time, Detroit was transitioning from a small city with modest manufacturing opportunities, into one of the biggest industrial centres in the United States.[13] This growing reputation for job opportunities and lower rent than other major cities appealed to the immigrant population, drawing them into the urban centre.[14] Of Detroit's 465,000 citizens in 1910, a little over a quarter were foreign born.[15] The city's growth was enhanced by the influx of immigrants to the United States as well as domestic migration from the southern states and rural communities.

[11] Keith Jones, "American Nativism and Exclusion: the rise and fall of immigration restriction league, 1894-1921," (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 2013), 10.
[12] Robert Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit: from the beginning, 1762-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 52.
[13] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 53.
[14] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 56.
[15] Irwin J. Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities: a history* (Laingsburg: City Vision Publishing in cooperation with Boreal Press, 2003), 49.

As with most ethnic groups, the Jewish community chose to live in close proximity to one another. In this case, they occupied the east side of town, in an area frequently referred to as the "Jewish Quarter."[16] This area fell behind in terms of municipal upkeep, and unlike most residential neighbourhoods, the factories were often in the midst of residential areas.[17] With eighteen orthodox temples opening between 1880 and 1914, the immigrant Jewish population brought many customs with them, transplanting them into their new community.[18] By the 1920s, Detroit's Jewish population accounted for 3.5 percent of the overall population of the city. Located in the east side of Detroit, the Jewish quarter was characterized by a lack of gardens, a dense population, and a wide variety of stores such that one would rarely need to leave the neighbourhood.[19] Most American-born Jews were the children of immigrant parents, like Maurice Sugar, and continued to live in the densely populated Jewish Quarter.

Those living in the Jewish Quarter felt the impact of a larger anti-semitism movement in the United States. By the 1890s, anti-semitism was on the rise with increased rates of violence being perpetuated mostly by Irish and Polish neighbours.[20] These developments were not unique to Detroit, and the patterns of violence against the Jewish population were prevalent throughout American cities.[21] As with most minority and immigrant communities, "reporters noted, the district was especially densely inhabited and crowded, and the children overran the streets."[22]

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[16] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 59.
[17] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 62.
[18] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 70.
[19] Robert Rockaway, "The Notorious Purple Gang: Detroit's All-Jewish Prohibition Era Mob," *Shofar* 20, no. 1 (2001): 114.
[20] Robert Rockaway, "Anti-Semitism in an American City: Detroit, 1850-1914." *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (1974): 47.
[21] Rockaway, "Anti-Semitism in an American City", 50.
[22] Kenneth Waltzer, "Eastern European Jewish Detroit in the Early Twentieth Century," *Jews and the Urban Experience* (2000): 294.

The press was contributing to the creation of a new American national identity.[23] America's white, Christian society was developing awareness of the Jewish community's growth in the last decade of the nineteenth century.[24] Alongside awareness arose fear of losing their own culture to an influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Catholic immigrants from Southern and Western Europe.[25]

While a poor excuse for exclusionary practices and anti-Semitic tendencies, this perceived threat and resulting fear was the prevalent excuse for more racist practices in the United States. These practices found their way into Detroit industry through the upper-class business owners, most of whom were white American Christians. Cultural differences were extensive and racial tensions were high in the early twentieth century. Certain neighbourhoods were perceived as exclusively white Christian areas, off-limits to any other race or religion.[26]

Like most Jewish communities in American cities, Detroit's Jewish community was heavily divided. American Judaism was overseen by two major institutions: the reform Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), and the conservative orthodox United Synagogue of America. The early twentieth century saw a large influx of Easter European Jewish immigrants, thanks to the "push" of anti-Semitic practices rising in Europe, and the "pull" of American industrial jobs. Theologically, the reform UAHC was more progressive than the conservative orthodox United Synagogue of America. However, socially, the UAHC adopted nativist politics that mirrored the broader American social landscape. Upon arrival, Jewish immigrants would discover that the UAHC did not welcome Eastern European members, as they were attempting to

[23] Richard Kaplan, "The American Press and Political Community: Reporting in Detroit 1865-1920," *Media, Culture & Society* 19 (1997): 333.
[24] Rockaway, "Anti-Semitism in an American City", 43.
[25] Rockaway, "Anti-Semitism in an American City," 49.
[26] Rockaway, "Anti-Semitism in an American City", 52.

build a strong middle-class American membership.[27] Both orthodoxy and reformed Judaism were present within Detroit's community, and on occasion banded together to celebrate milestones within the community.[28]

Despite these divisions, the Jewish community in Detroit was beginning to flourish by the early 1900s. Their numbers were increasing, and community involvement grew alongside the increased population. American industry and United Synagogue of America alike strove to retain Jewish immigrants. By maintaining a steady labour force, the industrial sector encouraged Americanization throughout the First World War.[29] Meanwhile the reformed and Orthodox Jewish congregations grew in numbers and rooted themselves firmly within their broader communities. Looking to the future generations to come, David Simons (a prominent Jewish businessman at the turn of the twentieth century) wrote a letter to Detroit's future Jewish population:

> "As the nineteenth century closes, the life of the Jew of Detroit as regards business and the professions is marked by no peculiar phenomena. In his choice of a pursuit, there is little to distinguish the Jew of today from other citizens of the community…During the last decade or two there has been a tendency among the younger men and women to mingle more or less with gentiles in a social way and if we may judge of the future by the trend of the present, it would seem that in time many of the social barriers will be swept away as have been those of mercantile, professional and political life…the Jew has maintained his social and religious exclusiveness for over three thousand years, but more has been done to abolish that

[27] Rachel Ellis, "Outreach and Exclusion: Jewish Denominational Marketing in the Early 20th Century," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 1 (2015): 38.
[28] Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities*, 50.
[29] Saima Akhtar, "Immigrant Island Cities in Industrial Detroit," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 2 (2015): 178.

same exclusiveness in the last fifty years in the more enlightened countries that was accomplished in all the rest of the thirty centuries put together."[30]

Simons highlights the strength of Detroit's Jewish community, and the prosperous future he wishes upon it. He saw a future in which social barriers would be eliminated. Unfortunately, the social barriers would just be rising for Detroit's Jewish population as anti-semitism would rise for decades to come. Sugar and Mezerick describe a community with little economic or social divide between themselves as Jewish children and their non-Jewish peers. This was supported by the prominent members of Detroit's Jewish community who sought a cohesive integration within Detroit society and the broader economy. However, we know that Detroit's Jewish population was heavily divided like the rest of American Jewry along orthodox and reformed lines.[31] While the early twentieth century included an increase in Jewish integration within Detroit's various communities and businesses, the 1920s would include significant growth in anti-semitic sentiments.

While industrial jobs initially drew Jewish immigrants to Detroit, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the Jewish population had mostly transitioned to commerce, management, and white-collar jobs.[32] The Detroit Board of Commerce contributed to the social image of Jewish immigrants by distributing pamphlets that "described the immigrant as nonthreatening, and instead, worked to flatten their identities and emphasized their value as a foundational source upon which the American industrial city could be built."[33] While these efforts were certainly helpful, there were still many Americans who perceived the Eastern

[30] Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities*,
[31] Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities*, 38.
[32] Rockaway, *The Jews of Detroit*, 119.
[33] Ahktar, "Immigrant Island Cities in Industrial Detroit", 178.

European Jewish immigrants as pushy, selfish, and as having "disdain for the rights of others."[34] The support provided by the Board of Commerce was off-set by anti-Jewish publications and rhetoric supported by industry giants. Henry Ford was a high-profile anti-Semite in the city of Detroit. He purchased the *Dearborn Independent*, a weekly newspaper that he used to attack Jewish popular culture in the United States.[35] In doing so, he spread his personal views throughout the country alongside the distribution of his automobiles. While Henry Ford maintained significant influence within the city and surrounding area and perpetuated his ideals through the use of his own wealth and persona, he was not the root of Detroit's anti-Semitism.Go through the document and check for capitalization on semitic/semitism Rather he was the product of decades-worth of developing anti-Jewish sentiment. He was a product of his environment, one which encouraged segregated neighbourhoods, and actively discouraged inclusivity. This was particularly striking to Detroit's Jewish population, which was well aware of the increasing number of pogroms and discriminatory policies that were occurring in Poland and Eastern Europe.[36] Many had emigrated from these countries, only to arrive in Detroit to find a prominent member of the community publicly spreading hateful messages on a weekly basis.

Looking at memoirs will offer some insights into the way that anti-semitism affected the lives of ordinary people. Both Sugar and Mezerick recount anecdotes demonstrating the presence of anti-Jewish rhetoric in the greater Detroit area. While documentary sources can provide insight into the broader these and issues with anti-semitism, memoirs elaborate the human element. They allow the reader to see the how everyday experiences affected Jewish people, how they navigated and grew from these experiences.

[34] Waltzer, "Eastern European Jewish Detroit in the Early Twentieth Century", 295.
[35] Waltzer, "Eastern European Jewish Detroit in the Early Twentieth Century", 304.
[36] Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Community*, 70.

The final background on the memoirs is Detroit's leftist labour and civil rights movements. Both Sugar and Mezerick were active in these movement, dedicating their careers to fighting for civil and workers' rights, and fighting against discrimination. They were both part of a much longer and larger tradition of activism, that was rooted in the rise of the labour movement in the 20th century.

Detroit would be a stronghold for the labour movement. The heavy industrialization, rapid growth, and poor work conditions created an opportune setting for the development of radical unionism. In the early years of the 20th-century, the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) gained support in Detroit. The IWW were a revolutionary international industrial union born out of Chicago, with ties to both socialist and anarchist movements who urged all industrial workers to join a single union. Detroit was an active centre of the IWW, but the movement as a whole declined in the 1920s.

Following a decade of prosperity, the Great Depression hit the city hard, with thousands in the auto industry in particular losing their jobs. In 1932, a group of unemployed Ford workers organized the Hunger March to express their grievances with the company. On March 7, 1932, thousands marched and demanded that Ford re-hire workers, and address other issues including giving workers the right to organize unions, and the end of racial discrimination in hiring practices.[37] .

The workers' Hunger March helped unite workers and contributed to the rise of industrial unionism. The United Auto Workers Union (UAW) would emerge in Detroit fueled by a series of sit-down strikes in 1935-36. The UAW's power would grow over the next thirty years. It was a series of strikes in 1937 following Flint sit-down strike that would cement Detroit's status as a

[37] Scott Martelle, *Detroit: a biography.* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2012), 122.

union town. UAW workers were recognized as "the elite workers of the industrial world" by the time Walter P. Reuther took on his leadership role with the union from 1946-1970.

The leftist movement fought for workers rights, human rights, racial equality, and was actively involved in the fight against anti-semitism. By the 1940s, the union fights allowed Detroit to represent America's vision of an "arsenal of democracy."[38] The leftists labour and civil rights movements were gaining momentum with every passing year, as the urban North was struggling to come to terms with its biracial nature.[39] Social challenges would manifest in industry as well, and the labour movement would contribute to the general leftist civil rights movement. The leftist movement extended beyond workers rights and industrial unionism, to human rights and racial equality. Both Sugar and Mezerick would work with the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights to combat the Black Legion in the area.[40]

One of the issues that leftists in Detroit worked to address was racism, and even terrorism aimed at Black people. Many activists, including Sugar and Mezerick, fought against these movements, the most prominent of which was the Black Legion. [41] The Black Legion arose from the fear Americans faced during the Great Depression. While the newspapers "depicted the Black Legion as night riding ex-Klansmen whose devotion to 100% Americanism was portrayed as a perverted form of patriotism", they could also be defined as the extreme case of American nativism.[42] This extreme group of domestic terrorists were known for murders, floggings, arson, and kidnapping that targeted minorities, as well as union organizers and communist

[38] Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: politics, labor, and race in a modern American city* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7.
[39] Thompson, *Whose Detroit*?, 8.
[40] American Civil Liberties Union and Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, "Black Legion – Citizens Committee", roster.
[41] Martelle, *Detroit*, 125.
[42] Kenneth Dvorak, "Terror in Detroit: The Rise and Fall of Michigan's Black Legion" (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2000), 28.

sympathizers.[43] Maurice Sugar himself was a target for Black Legion assassination, due to his reputation as a lawyer 'for the people'. He argued that the Black Legion thrived in Detroit's anti-unionist automotive industry, high numbers of minority workers, the history of the Ku Klux Klan in the city, and the clash of working-class cultures.[44]

Ultimately, the leftist movement in Detroit permeated industry to incorporate workers rights, civil rights, and racial equality. It relied upon the support of large numbers of individuals through industrial unionism. While neither Sugar nor Mezerick were industrial workers, they used their education and their professional skills to support the movement and advance its social goals.

[43] Dvorak, "Terror in Detroit", 30.
[44] Dvorak, "Terror in Detroit", 47.

MEMOIRS AS SOURCES

Autobiographies and memoirs are often tied together within the same genre. In documenting their personal experiences, both Sugar and Mezerick engaged in this centuries old literary genre. The genre has evolved consistently, shifting from confessions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to histories in the eighteenth century, to personal narratives and memoirs in the nineteenth century.[45] What remained consistent through the shifting forms was the demonstration of a life that "is created or constructed by the act of autobiography."[46] Jerome Bruner argues that the author's interpretation of their life experiences are just as important as the events they are describing.

According to Ben Folkenflik, memoirs generally follow a set of guidelines. They tend to be written in the first person, they are written in the author's old age, they include narratives about the past, they are grounded in consciousness, and they are focused on personal identity.[47] Memoirs differ from autobiographies in that they place "greater emphasis on other people or upon events experienced in common with others, and sometimes by its more episodic structure which does not need to be tied to the personal development of the narrator."[48] The need for historical vigilance while interpreting memoirs and autobiographies derives not from the tell-tale characteristics of the genre itself, but rather the author's potential to be deliberately fictitious, to continually exaggerate and distort their own story.[49]

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[45] Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History*, (Riverhead Books, 2010), 40, 48, 64.
[46] Jerome Bruner, "The Autobiographical Process" in *The Culture of Autobiography*, ed. Robert Folkenflick (Stanford University Press, 1993), 38.
[47] Robert Folkenflik, *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 15-17.
[48] Ruxandra Petrinca, "Halfway between Memory and History: Romanian Gulag Memoirs as a Genre" *Slovo* 29, no. 1 (2017): 8.
[49] Kenneth R. Janken, "The Uses of Memoir in Writing History: of what I learned about autobiography from John Hope Franklin and August Meier," *Southern Cultures* 22, no. 1 (2016): 134.

According to Ruxandra Petrinca, historical vigilance proves to be challenging when addressing memoirs because of their highly personal nature. They are often written by survivors of prejudice, injustice, or traumatic events. As a result, historians may be unwilling to critique accounts because this could "be interpreted as an attack on the truthfulness of the representation of their experience."[50] However, memoirs hold value beyond a source for historical fact. They offer an individual interpretation of life in a different time. They can be unapologetically honest and beautifully insightful, despite the potential for confused time periods and exaggerated stories.

Psychological studies tell us that certain memories are better preserved than others. This is largely impacted by the importance of the events upon emotional development and degree of emotional response to experiences. Within these confines, positive memories are more accurately remembered than negative memories.[51] Keeping this in mind while interpreting memoirs as historical sources is beneficial because it allows the reader to look beyond hard facts. The memoir's usefulness is in the writer's interpretation of their life experiences, not the accurate re-telling of those events.

Children are profoundly affected by their surroundings. Their lived experiences are representative of the world in which they grow up and will help explain the perspectives of the adults they become. By understanding how children viewed the world they inhabited, we can come to understand why the same society evolved as it did. When reaching back more than a single generation, our sources regarding childhood experiences are severely limited. This is where memoirs become an invaluable resource.

[50] Petrinca, "Halfway between Memory and History," 10.
[51] Shirley Dex, "La fiabilité des données de souvenir : une revue de la littérature" *Recherche et Applications en Marketing* 9, no. 2 (1994) : 87.

It is challenging to study minorities through the use of memoirs because there are very few written first-hand accounts of working-class life in the early twentieth century. There are a variety of possible explanations for this; the most likely being a lack of education. Both Stuart Tolnay and Darlene Clark Hine recognize that oral histories would provide invaluable insight into motivations and experiences in the early twentieth century. However, they were not widely used by historians and social scientists at the time they would have been available.[52] Clark Hine notes that comfortable sources of data must be paired with oral histories, autobiographies and more, in order to properly illuminate both historical motivations and outcomes.[53]

Biographies are not treated with the same hostility or judgement as autobiographies and memoirs. Yet they are simply a written account of another individual's life. So what makes one person's life story more valuable than another? Why cannot we regard the average person's story with the same respect and treat it as equally valuable? I propose that they are not only worth telling, but that their stories are critical to fully understanding any given event, time-period, or transition.

The following analysis of the two memoirs by Sugar and Mezerick will demonstrate how these sources may add a personal element to understanding a busy transitional time in Detroit's history. Neither was published; both are in manuscript form. These manuscripts beg many questions, including how the authors have chosen to portray their lives. First person genres primarily tell about how people perceive themselves.[54] Therefore, we must question how the authors are demonstrating their personal perceptions of their lives. How did they see their

[52] Stewart Tolnay, "The African American "Great Migration" and Beyond" *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 210.
[53] Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915-1945" in *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, ed. Joe William Trotter Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 128-129.
[54] Peter Heehs, *Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs, and the History of the Self* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 6.

childhoods? How did they understand their role within the city? How did they perceive their contributions to the world around them? Why did they choose to include these particular stories in their memoirs? What light can memoirs shed on their later lives as Jewish Detroiters and as active members in Detroit's leftists social movement of the early 20th century?

ANALYSIS OF SUGAR/MEZERICK MEMOIRS

Maurice Sugar

Maurice Sugar (1891-1974) is best known as chief legal counsel of the United Auto Workers Union from 1937-46. However, prior to that success, he was simply a boy from Brimley, Michigan, who moved to Detroit with his family in July 1900. Coming from a small northern Michigan community, the grandeur of cinema, streetcars, and flushing toilets were wondrous to a young boy who was unaccustomed to city luxuries.[55] During the summer months, he held a number of jobs, including a factory job that would expose him to worker solidarity for the first time.[56] Sugar would go on to be heavily involved in extra-curricular activities in his youth, including taking on the role of editor of the school annual in his senior year of high school.[57]

The Sugar family's financial security allowed Maurice to attend a three-year college program. He chose law due to the additional vocational opportunities the degree presented.[58] Sugar graduated in 1913 with bourgeoning leftist ideologies and few job prospects.[59] His leftist ideologies first appeared during his summer work as a university student when he experienced worker solidarity for the first time. However, his activism began with his first job as a lawyer. Following his first few years actively working for the Socialist party and advancing leftist ideals in Detroit, Sugar was disbarred and imprisoned in 1919 for "conspiracy to obstruct" military

[55] Maurice Sugar, "Detroit", unpublished memoir, 1962-70, 3, Maurice Sugar Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
[56] Sugar, "Detroit", 26.
[57] Sugar, "Detroit", 17.
[58] Sugar, "I Go to College", unpublished memoir, 1962-70, 3, Maurice Sugar Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
[59] Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar : law, labor, and the left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 4.

draft operations.[60] His ten months at the Detroit House of Correction would sway his political ideologies further to the left and establish his strong belief in revolutionary ideals.[61]

It was1923 before Sugar was able to practice law once more, at which point he would fully commit himself to his legal practice.[62] During his years as a practicing lawyer, Sugar spearheaded the fight to unionize auto workers.[63] His career would include a plethora of legal cases that aimed to protect workers whose savings were lost by private banks by 1930.[64] Sugar helped coordinate the sit down strikes and worked with the ACLU during the depression years to achieve unionization.[65] Alongside his legal career, Sugar was also an avid songwriter. His song, "Sit Down" was a favourite of the workers during the Sit Down strikes.[66] His songs would appear in newspapers and union distribution materials. They largely focused on workers' rights and socialist ideologies.

In 1950, Sugar and his wife retired to northern Michigan. After he retired, he wrote his memoir, following the urgings of friends and colleagues. While he finished the memoir, he never published it. After he died in 1974 at the age of 83, his family donated his unpublished memoirs along with other papers and documents from his career to the Wayne State University Walter P. Reuther Library. The remainder of his collection at Wayne State University's Walter P. Reuther Library comprises a large collection of personal papers (writing from his youth, high school, and college years) including songs for which he would receive public acclaim, as well as a large collection of his papers from his time with the UAW.

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[60] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 72.
[61] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 78-86.
[62] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 101.
[63] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 109.
[64] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 113.
[65] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 118.
[66] Walter P. Reuther Library. "Maurice Sugar Papers" Last modified November 14, 2008. http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/2883

Avrahm G. Mezerick

The middle child of a rural optician, Avrahm G. Mezerick (1912-1986) grew up in a financially insecure home. He would go on to work a number of jobs that did not require formal education as he worked in support of the civil and labour rights movements. Alongside his wife, Mezerick served as the steering committee chair for the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights (CPCR). During his time with the CPCR he would fight against police brutality, violence, and discrimination in the automotive factories. He would also work against the rise of the Black Legion in Detroit.[67] During these years, Mezerick and Sugar would have worked together with the CPCR. However, these years are not featured in their memoirs because they each ended their manuscripts before reaching that point.

By the 1940s, the couple would move to New York City where Avrahm would work as a journalist, writing for multiple publications and serving as a United Nations correspondent. His published works, mostly articles, were focused on politics and the economy. These would build on his leftist views that developed during his years living in Detroit.

He began writing his memoir when he was in his seventies, but he never finished it. He died in 1986. The memoir as well as his personal papers were donated to the Walter Reuther Library at Wayne State in the early 1970s. The A.G. and Marie Mezerick Papers include Avrahm's memoir, as well as a scrapbook focused on the work the couple did with the Black Legion Citizens Committee, Aid the Spanish Republic and China Aid Committees, and the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights. These pieces collectively demonstrate the Mezericks' dedication to the civil rights movement that swept through Detroit in the 1930s.

[67] Walter P. Reuther Library, "Hidden Gem", http://reuther.wayne.edu/node/12999

Sugar/Mezerick Memoirs as Sources

Both Sugar and Mezerick's memoirs are located at the Walter P. Reuther Library as part of their individual archival collections. The Reuther Library holds many labour collections, including multiple collections from the UAW and civil rights groups in Detroit and Michigan. Given the importance of the Detroit labour movement for these men, it seems logical that their personal papers found their way to such a significant labour archive, named for a man who worked alongside Maurice Sugar in the early days of the UAW.

In his seventies, Sugar finally gave in to his friends and colleagues and sat down to write his memoirs. He focused heavily on the legal cases that shaped his career. But more importantly for this study, he recounted his childhood in vivid detail. The result is what Christopher Johnson, the author of *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950*, calls "a headache for any potential publisher but a gold mine for the historian."[68] The memoir follows his life and career sequentially. However, it omits his culminating years with the UAW. Rather, the focus is on the build-up and the creation of the union.

His writing mostly reflects his career. It is very straightforward, focused on recounting his memories and experiences without frivolity or unnecessary additives. However, there are also poetic elements to Sugar's anecdotes as the songwriter in him shines through. Sugar's songs were largely focused on workers' rights and working conditions. There are very direct songs, like "A Dollar Seventy-Five" which singles out Gracie Hall Roosevelt, a Detroit City Controller in 1932 for claiming that "A dollar seventy-five is ample to provide a worker with food for a

[68] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 17.

week". The song illustrates how the worker gets weaker and weaker over the course of four weeks "eating a la Roosevelt" before loudly stating

"To hell with your plan of starving a la Roosevelt.

To hell with you and your dollar seventy-five.

We're strong enough to fight to keep from starving,

And you will learn that we are still alive!"[69]

His stories maintain the same directness, while incorporating additional storytelling techniques and enough contextual details to bring the reader into the anecdote without weighing down the story.

The extensive manuscript covers his life from youth to adulthood, focussed on the years leading up to the strongest years of the UAW. For the purpose of this study, in order to remain comparative with Mezerick's manuscript, I have focused on the third and fourth chapter of Sugar's work. This encompasses his family's arrival in Detroit in 1900 through to his decision to pursue law upon graduating high school. These chapters are heavily focussed on the city of Detroit. His writing is most focused on the development of his leftist ideals and how they solidified over the years with the assistance of a series of observations, lived experiences, and later legal cases that he worked upon.

Sugar does not hesitate to boast of his achievements, but readily admits to his own shortcomings. There is an unsurprising maturity to his writing given that his manuscript was written in his seventies. Beyond the maturity of retrospection, Sugar demonstrates the importance of education to his life by his choice of lens through which to discuss his childhood. By placing the emphasis on his educational endeavours and their impact upon his life, he

[69] Maurice Sugar, "A Dollar Seventy-Five", song, Maurice Sugar Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

validates his parents' claim that he and his brothers' education was their reason for moving to Detroit. Furthermore, Sugar explains his memories thoroughly and demonstrates how they impacted his emotional maturation.

Meanwhile, Mezerick's manuscript is a very short unfinished work. With only two chapters, it is less than thirty pages long. His memoir focuses on how the city of Detroit evolved throughout his childhood. He describes the transition away from "The City Where Life Is Worth Living" to "The Turbulent City" – as he named the chapters of his manuscript. His own experiences are used to highlight the manner in which this occurred and how these changes affected his life as a young man growing up in Detroit.

Mezerick's writing paints a picture of an idyllic city and is heavily romanticized. His manuscript tells a story of a childhood where he felt responsible for the financial security of his family. He describes the city of Detroit romantically, emphasizing the importance of the automotive industry, beyond the scope of employment, reaching into the every day social impact. He depicts early twentieth-century Detroit as an ever-changing city full of endless opportunities as well as hardship. His stories are full of vivid imagery and detailed accounts that also shed light on his later career as a journalist and civil rights activist. [His journalistic career lends his writing greater credibility because the press had become "an ostensibly independent, fact.ual news service and impartial adjudicator of access to the public sphere."][70] I would suggest re-phrasing this last sentence for clarity. Something like, The fact that Mezerick was a journalist gives credibility to his memoir, as his career was focussed on credible, accurate news coverage. As Kaplan notes, at the time Mezerick was working, the journalism field was developing standards aiming at professionalism and gaining the public trust – or something along those lines.

[70] Kaplan, "The American Press and Political Community", 332.

Family Background

Maurice Sugar was born in Brimley, a small northern Michigan community primarily built upon logging, to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. The family's connection to organized Judaism would be limited, and the children would learn progressively less and less of their parents' language and culture due to their parents' efforts to assimilate to their anglophone surroundings. While Maurice's oldest sister could occasionally communicate with their parents in Yiddish, Maurice could only understand a few common words and phrases.[71]

The Sugar family highly valued education. They owned a general store in Brimley, and when the family moved to Detroit, Maurice's father stayed behind to continue running the store and financially support his family. Education was valued so much that they were willing to divide the family temporarily to offer the children the best education possible. Their choice was supported when Maurice was placed two grades behind in Detroit than he had been in Brimley. The caliber of education was much higher. While the family was not particularly financially secure at the time, they did not expect the children to contribute to the household finances in any significant way. Maurice had a paper route to help contribute, but he did not maintain work that interfered with his schoolwork.[72]

While education was the family's first priority, their financial struggles grew as the years went by. By the time he reached high school, Maurice had to move back to Brimley for a couple of years to help run the general store with his father. When he returned to Detroit to finish high school, his father relocated to be with the family. Some poor investment decisions would financially de-stabilize the family in the years to come. At this time, Maurice's education would be affected as he was forced to choose from the three-year college programs available in the city.

[71] Sugar, "Detroit", 37.
[72] Sugar, "Detroit", 4.

Despite his family's financial difficulties that began to disrupt his education, the years of hardship helped shape his experiences and perspectives on the lives of working-class people. While in Brimley, he witnessed the organization of the lumber workers who went on strike to increase both their pay and job security.[73] During his high school years, Sugar sought work due to "the necessity to relieve the family's financial situation…coupled with my desire to have some experience in the field of manual labour."[74] His parents believed in him seeking higher education and were able to contribute in limited measures. However, Sugar had to work and contribute to his own tuition as well. It was during these years working to put himself through school that Sugar first experienced worker solidarity.[75]

While Sugar had been on the fringes of the middle class in Detroit, he had suffered socially at school due to his Jewish heritage. In the machine shop where he worked in high school, he found support and acceptance from the workers he encountered. Sugar portrays himself as grateful for the opportunities his parents were able to afford him. His memoir does not begrudge his father's poor investments, rather focusing on the positive aspects of the family's move to Detroit. Even when he discusses the brief return to Brimley, he frames it by noting that this was how he was able to pursue athletic endeavours by making the football team. He had not been able to make the team in Detroit but chose to commend the coach on his "excellent judgment in his selection of the team members."[76] Positivity and gratitude for every opportunity abound in Sugar's memoir. He commends those who challenged him and shows appreciation for those who opened doors for him.

[73] Johnson, *Maurice Sugar*, 27.
[74] Sugar, "Detroit", 23.
[75] Sugar, "Detroit", 26.
[76] Sugar, "Detroit", 21.

Like Sugar, Mezerick also came from a background of financial uncertainty. Mezerick's unpublished memoir portrays a childhood full of joy and hardship. He demonstrates the toll that his childhood financial uncertainty had upon his adult psyche by placing such great emphasis on it throughout his memoir. The work ethic he required in his youth would carry on into his career as an adult. His illustration of small joys in riding a bike and identifying cars by the sound of their motors amidst the racial tensions he describes in the city, shows how he came to understand the broader challenges American society was facing.

Mezerick grew up in a practicing Jewish household. His own experiences with religion were rather limited, including a single lesson with the local rabbi that left him running out the door after knocking over books too many times for the strict rabbi's liking.[77] While his parents practiced their faith, they failed to provide sufficient explanations of their faith to their son, who would not actively practice his parents' faith.

His parents also did not place great emphasis on education, rather relying on young Avrahm to contribute to the family's income. Due to his father's unreliable income as an itinerant optician, the household budget was tight. This was exacerbated by one sister who suffered from such severe epilepsy she was unable to work, and a brother who, despite working, had such a gambling addiction that he also failed to contribute to the household income[78] Thus as a young teenager, Mezerick felt the need to contribute alongside his older sister, who worked as a cash girl, to support the family.[79] He writes of a slew of jobs he maintained throughout his

[77] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", unpublished memoir, 1985, 6, A.G. Mezerick and Marie Hempel Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
[78] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 4.
[79] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 4.

adolescence, beginning with a paper route and eventually leaving high school early to pursue a job with Pierre Marquette Railroads, working with losses and damaged goods.[80]

By choosing to construct a narrative in which he focusses on describing the hardships he faced while only exhibiting fleeting moments of joy, Mezerick offers insights into why he spent his life fighting social and economic inequality. He began as an impoverished youth, working to help support his family. Through his hard work and dedication, he was able to overcome his humble beginnings and build a career for himself. The city he grew up in was growing alongside him, creating a parallel narrative. Detroit industry's success depended upon the hard work of thousands of men and women, many of whom were exploited by the very companies they dedicated their lives to. As a journalist, Mezerick would dedicate himself to improving the social and economic inequality that plagued the city. He depicts himself as a contributing, hard working member of society – even as a child, illustrating his own humble beginnings that would inspire his later work.

Perceptions of Detroit

Maurice Sugar's memoir is more focused on his own personal development than the city around him. Nevertheless, his childhood perceptions of moving from a small town to Detroit revealed his wonder and excitement of life in a modern city. When his family first moved to the city, he had not previously experienced indoor plumbing. Because a fire truck went by the hotel shortly after he pulled the chain used to flush the toilet for the first time, he believed that the chain was used to call the fire department.[81] As a young boy he looked upon Detroit with awe. The cinema and city lights brought him joy and excitement over his new life in the big city.

[80] Mezerick, "Detroit the Dynamic", unpublished memoir, 1985, 17, A.G. Mezerick and Marie Hempel Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
[81] Sugar, "Detroit", 3.

Because his story focusses on people and experiences rather than perception, we must look at what his stories tell us about the world around him. Sugar's stories largely focus on the benefits living in Detroit brought him in comparison to his time in Brimley. Detroit was the far more competitive environment. He made a point of saying that while he played varsity sports in Brimley, he only made junior teams in Detroit. He also admitted that when he moved to Detroit, he was put back two grades, suggesting he was entering a more rigorous academic environment. . His adolescent stories also begin to demonstrate his perception of injustices he observed. This includes his personal experience running for his high school student council presidency. It was his first personal experience with prejudice, as multiple classmates stipulated the only reason they voted against him was because he was Jewish. However, he does not comment on this souring his view of the community he lived in. Rather, it seems to bring him drive and determination to succeed in his future endeavours. Ultimately, he shows that the big city had higher standards than his small hometown, and that the challenges it presented him, forced him to grow despite setbacks. These challenges and injustices helped him develop the tenacity he would need to overcome the challenges he would face throughout his career and life as an activist.

Another story he told in his memoirs about his growing up years illustrates how he came to appreciate worker solidary. While working in a factory to help fund his schooling he attempted to work a machine he was not trained on. When he ruined materials, he expected the senior workers to come back and turn him in to the supervisor. Instead they helped hide the ruined materials and went about their day as if nothing happened. Their actions allowed Sugar to learn from his mistake and keep his job. This act of solidarity further solidified his leftist ideology as he attributed these same characteristics to all workers in the city. By including this

story in his memoirs, Sugar provides insights into his personal connections with his later fight for workers' rights.

This is further exemplified when he graduated from law school. His job prospects were bleak as it was challenging for a Jewish man to be hired by a well-respected law firm. A contact offered him a job that Sugar viewed as reliable, but would lack the intellectual stimulation and the passion that he sought. Therefore, he took the risk of turning down that job, and setting out on his own to serve the labour movement. This single choice would set his career on its incredible path. By framing this decision as a risky endeavour, Sugar highlights his dedication to the movement, and his willingness to take chances to further longer-term goals. In many ways, this connects to other stories he told about sacrifice, like his parents' moving the family to Detroit for better educational opportunities, despite the financial hardships.

While Sugar's memoir focuses on his personal experiences, Mezerick spends more time discussing the city that surrounded him and the impact that it had upon his life. He saw the juxtaposition of the city's grandeur with the intense socio-economic disparity that he witnessed in his neighbourhood. This would fuel his ideals and would inspire his later work with leftist groups throughout the city. Detroit's automotive industry is easily glorified because of its rapid growth. Likely due to the nature of his later work with the labour movement, Mezerick took the time to acknowledge the problems with Detroit industry working conditions, and the problematic behaviour of the men running the biggest companies. His memoir includes stories about Henry Leland (the founder of Cadillac and Lincoln automotive brands), and the damages the Dodge brothers, who founded a company that would become part of Chrysler Motor Company, inflicted upon the local bars. The brothers were known for their hot tempers, aggravated by alcohol, and

their ability to pay for any necessary repairs following their destruction.[82] He speaks of the Dodge brothers making their parts for a stock agreement with Ford as if he remembered it happening, despite the fact that the agreement took place in 1903 (nearly a decade before the Mezerick family's arrival in Detroit).[83]

Mezerick claims that the destruction of the Dodge brothers, paired with their partnership with the Ford Motor Company, ended what he called the "Life is Worth Living Era" in Detroit.[84] When he makes this statement in his memoir, it is meant as a personal opinion, not a historical argument. However, it is an example of how one man interpreted the events he witnessed in his childhood. His stories are a mixture of his own personal experiences and observations, stories he heard as a child, and stories he would have learned about as an adult. By including anecdotes that portray company owners in such a negative light, Mezerick reveals his perception that these men are misappropriating this social power. While he, a social activist, dedicates his career to advance social justice issues and workers' rights, these men with the power to drive change are pre-occupied with using their clout to destroy property and create further social divide.

The changes the city of Detroit was undergoing included significant growth in population, economic success, and racial discord. Mezerick constructed his narrative to demonstrate the deterioration of "the city where life is worth living."[85] By creating further social division through economic and racialized means, men like Ford and the Dodge brothers were bringing a wind of change to the city of Detroit. This would stand out to Mezerick in particular, an activist who fought against these divisive movements. By choosing to include dramatic tales

[82] Charles Hyde, "The Dodge Brothers, the Automobile Industry, and Detroit Society in the Early Twentieth Century," *Michigan Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1996):
[83] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 4.
Hyde, "The Dodge Brothers", 54.
[84] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 4.
[85] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 1.

that stood out to him as a child and young adult, Mezerick stays true to the genre of memoirs, highlighting stories that had profound impact on him individually rather than those that may have held greater importance to the city.

Mezerick grew up gazing in awe of the automotive industry, fully aware of the impact it had on the city, both good and bad. Although the Jewish community living in Hamtramck near the plant tended to be more focussed on commercial employment rather than industrial, Mezerick's family was involved with the auto sector.[86] Mezerick's older brother worked for the Ford Motor Company (although his wages rarely made it home to help support the family).[87] They also lived near the Hamtramck plant, and he speaks of children so knowledgeable of the locally made cars, that they could turn their backs to the street and identify the cars going by based on the sounds made by each individual motor.[88] The industry was a part of the community. These tales that show how ingrained the local industry was in the community are not often available through traditional sources. Childhood stories from individuals who were not connected to the automotive industry illustrate that the industry's stories permeated every facet of Detroit society, making it a cornerstone for identity.

Being Jewish in Detroit

While Sugar describes his childhood as relatively happy, he does mention a few incidents of anti-Semitism that he experienced. The exposure to anti-Semitism check semisitm/Semitismwithin the city affected Sugar's daily life as well as his personal identity. He describes taking the streetcar as a teenager and overhearing two men talking about wanting to "put [the Jews] all together and keep them somewhere by themselves."[89] He describes his initial

[86] Waltzer, "East European Jewish Detroit in the Early Twentieth Century", 292.
[87] Mezerick "Turbulent City", 4.
[88] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 3.
[89] Sugar, "Detroit" 41.

impression of the men he encountered as having believed them to be nice men, good men, based on their appearance. However, he claimed that upon overhearing their conversation he felt personally threatened.[90] By telling that story, Sugar implied he no longer felt confident in his ability to trust that a person was good, or kind based on their appearance. That this memory remained firmly ingrained in Sugar's mind demonstrates that this was a critical developmental moment for him as it suggested that simply because anti-semitism was not always highly visible, did not mean it did not exist.

Sugar also related a story of anti-Semitism he encountered while running for class president at Central High School in Detroit. After a rigorous campaign, in which Sugar proved himself a worthy candidate, he lost. During conversations with classmates after the fact, many admitted to not voting for him purely because he was Jewish.[91] The majority of his childhood experiences with prejudice are brushed off as good-natured childhood nonsense. However, this is the first experience that he draws upon to exemplify the "environmental prejudice" he experienced as a non-practicing Jewish man.[92]

Despite the distance he established between himself and his heritage, Sugar remained victim to prejudice. Although it was not always outright, it continued to exist beneath the surface of Detroit society. While Sugar grew up with little direct contact with Jewish culture and traditions, Sugar was still affected by anti-semitism throughout his life. Although these were not routine experiences, they had sufficient impact that would affect his life and career. These prejudices would inspire Sugar to pursue a career in labour law, working to improve workers' rights and diminish prejudice in the workplace.

[90] Sugar, "Detroit" 41.
[91] Sugar, "Detroit", 40.
[92] Sugar, "Detroit", 41.

Meanwhile, the Mezerick family lived in a small Jewish area in Hamtramck, a racially diverse part of the city which also included a large Polish population and a very small Black population in nearby Paradise Valley.[93] Hamtramck was a working-class area, where most people worked in the auto industry. Although the area was considered a distinct community, a "factory town," it was far from cohesive. Mezerick recalled that his home, despite appearances, was not "the melting pot of the storybook."

Like Sugar, Mezerick focuses on more subtle encounters with anti-Semitism – community members that not only failed to support Jewish practices, but actively discouraged them. He speaks of a friendly deli owner that chose to encourage him, a young Jewish boy, to eat ham sandwiches whenever he stopped in, rather than supporting the family's faith and encouraging the child to follow his parents' religious doctrine.[94] While such a simple action itself is not inherently anti-Semitic, it is disrespectful to both the boy's faith and to his parents' authority. To a child who could never obtain an acceptable explanation behind any Jewish practice from his parents, a breach in their customs and religious doctrine widened the divide between Mezerick and his religious heritage.[95] In choosing to tell this story, Mezerick has highlighted his own distancing from his Jewish heritage, similarly to Sugar's experiences. Mezerick is highlighting the subtle anti-semitism that was part of early 20th century Detroit as it continued to affect him despite his distancing from the faith community.

Mezerick describes working conditions that were racially changed. Amongst his childhood stories are second hand stories of the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion within the factories, and the fear that they instilled in minority workers.[96] The tales he recounts in his

[93] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 1.
[94] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 7.
[95] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 9.
[96] Mezerick, "Turbulent City", 2.

memoirs imply that these actions were occurring during his childhood. However, we know that these organizations spread through Detroit in the 1930s. Furthermore, Mezerick never worked in a factory, but this does not mean these stories were irrelevant to his experience. It is very likely that these are simply an amalgamation of memories from his young adult years, prompted by the stories he heard from other community members who worked in the factories. Ultimately, the stories serve their narrative purpose. They validate the tense race relations that Mezerick perceived as a child and brings the discussion to light, reflecting his desire for these issues to be addressed.

Mezerick talking about events he never actually witnessed – specifically the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion, is similar to what Petrinca noted when studying Romanian Gulag memoirs, in which people who did not directly experience the Gulag directly continued to speak of it affecting their lives.[97] The historian is placed in a precarious social position when faced with questioning the accuracy of an individual's memoirs. One would never want to deny an individual's experience. However, we know that human memory is fallible; it is imperfect. That does not make a memory any less influential on an individual's growth or perception of their life. Mezerick included these anecdotes in his memoir to highlight the need for his commitment to social justice.

Maurice Sugar does not comment much on the racial tensions that were rising throughout his childhood. However, as an adult he was a Detroit representative on the Black Legion Citizens Committee that was organized by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Conference for the

[97] Petrinca, "Halfway between Memory and History,"

Protection of Civil Rights in 1936 to speak out and expose the terror brought about by the Black Legion.[98] His life's work was focused on the protection of civil rights for all workers.

Both men downplay the effect anti-Semitic sentiments had upon their childhoods. However, we know that childhood memories most often survive when attached to intense emotions.[99] The decisions both Sugar and Mezerick made to include specific details about stories that focus on personal experiences with anti-Semitism demonstrates that these experiences likely had a more profound impact than the authors chose to explicitly divulge.

[98] American Civil Liberties Union and Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, "Black Legion – Citizens Committee".
[99] Dex, "La fiabilité des données de souvenir : une revue de la littérature" 84.

CONCLUSION

Memoirs are so often discredited because of their subjectivity. However, it is this subjectivity that makes them so valuable. Labour history is so often dominated by documents pertaining to the movements, that the individuals who made up the movement are often forgotten. Because the creation of unions led to an increased sense of the 'collective' identity of workers, their individuality can be lost in the shuffle. Furthermore, the individuals who worked for labour and civil rights organizations provide critical insight into the movement and their physical environment.

Because Maurice Sugar witnessed collective bargaining from a young age, experienced worker solidarity, grew up between Detroit and Brimley, and then went on to make his career serving the labour movement in Detroit, he is able to offer a comparative view of the city versus the small town where he was born. His adult insight is apparent in his writing, but he also places emphasis upon his childhood reactions to the events he witnessed and experienced.

His understanding of the labour movement allows him to filter his memories to keep them relevant to his memoir's topic. While he does include some off-topic memories that add to the poetic nature of his writing, he mostly stays very focused on the bourgeoning movement to which he would dedicate his career. Because he was writing his personal memoir, and it did not go through a publisher's editing, it is completely his own perception of his life.

Sugar was a big name in Detroit's labour history. The cases he worked on would help set the path for the unions to follow. Records from his career provide this insight. His personal interpretation of what brought him to the point in his life where he could contribute to the leftist movement in such a significant way provides greater insight into the manner in which the city shaped him as an individual. Without this interpretation, we would not know what he understood

of the world around him. While retrospect is a wonderful analysis tool, nothing compares to the first-hand stories of an individual who experienced the events.

Meanwhile, Mezerick worked diligently for the Detroit civil rights movement before leaving the city for New York. His work and ideology was far less tied to Detroit proper than Sugar's. However, he also romanticized the city in which he grew up far more. While he did not mince words regarding the problems he observed, and he did not glorify any individuals, he spoke of the city itself with tenderness. It is clear that he felt that the city shaped him as an individual.

While the timeline of his memoir may be off, and it may not follow the narrative that historians are familiar with, that does not t make it any less valuable. Regardless of the timeline, Mezerick's reactions to the events he describes are what offer the social insight into the event. By focusing on this rather than hard dates, the narrative provides the reader with an understanding of a child's response at the time, and an adult's understanding of how those observations and reactions affected them throughout their life.

Collectively, these two memoirs provide insight into the lives and experiences of two men who significantly contributed to the city's leftist movement. Both Sugar and Mezerick came from modest backgrounds and had to contribute to household incomes from a young age. Their writings demonstrate their perception of the social and economic inequality that they observed throughout their formative years, and the manners in which their own experiences with anti-semitism influenced their future career paths. The inclusion of personal anecdotes and second-hand stories bring subtle attention to racial tensions within the city of Detroit at the time.

There is no doubt that using memoirs as historical sources requires the reader to read between the lines. They are not a reliable artifact to establish timelines. Rather they are a tool to

understand the social contexts and the world that the writer knew. Historians shy away from sources that they do not have control over. When the source pushes them outside of the comfortable firmly established timeline, it becomes easy for the historian to discard the source as unreliable.

Because memoirs often do not adhere to these firmly established timelines, they are often quickly discarded as too unreliable, or too contentious a source. However, we know that they offer insight beyond this. The fact that they allow the reader a glimpse into the past through their literary elements strengthens them. This visual provides greater insight and helps make history a more accessible discipline. While memoirs cannot be used exclusively, and they rely upon external research to confirm timeline validity, their social insight makes them an invaluable asset to historians who seek to go beyond a black and white study.

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